

Power, politics and environmental change

MA Environmental Humanities 2013-14

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Class 2

The politics of environmental change I: structuralism

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Intro

- **Purpose:** explain structuralist approach to the study of how power produces environmental change
- Reason **why** you should know this:
 - Because it is one main approach of explaining the role of politics in producing environmental change
 - Which you can use for your research/ understanding environmental change and governance

Class outline

- Discuss answers to student assignment
- Delve deeper in premises of structuralist explanation of environmental change and governance
- With short group exercises

“...the uncontrolled growth of **weeds** and their emerging dominance in the landscape do appear to symbolize disorder, decay, and the absence of control that accompany years of political and fiscal neglect. Socially speaking, the significance of weeds is not what they do but, rather, **what they represent**; the same can be said for the abandoned autos, heaps of garbage, discarded needles, condoms, and drug paraphernalia, and broken glass that are pervasive throughout the park” (Brownlow, 2006, p.242)

Why, according to Brownlow, have **disorder and decay** fallen upon Cobbs Creek?

CLASS ASSIGNMENT 3

Disorder and decay in Cobbs Creek

- Why?
 - A key factor/ key change that brought about disorder and decay
- **Loss of social (community) control** mechanisms that ensured park security for everyone
- What reasons produced this phenomenon?
 1. Actions of a man in power (Rizzo)
 2. Public Administration's neglect
 3. Change in gang culture

Personal agenda of one person in a seat of power

- Police Commissioner & then Mayor Rizzo:
 - his **actions** led to a loss of surveillance (local community social control) mechanisms
- **Actions: Rizzo policies**
 - 1974: Mayor Rizzo cuts park budget by 50% (compared to previous admin)
 - reduce importance of mounted Park Guard (personal vendetta) through its reduction: from 500 guards to 24 and its integration with the Philadelphia Police Department,
 - removal of park benches upon which members of the community would sit and observe “the world passing by”. This also led to elimination of an important element of community self-surveillance (benches)

Result of neglect (of racist-origins)

- Budget cuts started with Mayor Rizzo but continued: since early 80s (i.e. 3 decades=no increase)
- steady decline in budgetary spending on the park further compounded the problem
- budget cuts followed almost exact pattern as exodus of whites from the area (racism within the Philadelphia powerful decision-making institutions)

Change in gang culture

Gangs' informal agreement (50s) over park's neutrality

- John: “The park was sort of that neutral ground because everybody came to the park, and you had picnics out there and all kinds of things in that community – cook outs”
- Tom: “It was an unwritten agreement that the park would be neutral”

Change in gang culture

- Late 60s + early 70s: growing pressure of black power movement to cease black-on-black violence and focus energy and anger on greater social and political wrongs
 - Cobbs Creek's early gangs quietly disappear: informal park security they ensured also disappears
- late 1970s: decline of black identity movement and outmigration of middle-class blacks leaves power vacuum

Change in gang culture

- 1980s: re-emergence of gangs
 - structure and membership not like “organic, homegrown gangs of the 1950s and 1960s”
 - more violent forms and structures mimicked gang activity in cities like L.A., Chicago, and New York, **where there were no agreements, unwritten or otherwise**
 - End of agreement: emergence of violence

The bigger picture

- Loss of social control mechanisms must be analysed from a **wider perspective** of power relations' evolution within Philadelphia's recent history
 - civil rights movement, racial struggles, economic decay, etc.
- Rizzo's decisions to dismantle local social control mechanisms in Cobbs Creek can be seen as a form of **social control**
 - as a means of controlling social organization and activity among politically active black community during a period of racial upheaval
 - by removing their primary public arena of social intercourse and political exchange

STUDYING POWER THE STRUCTURALIST WAY

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY 1

Power: ability to control one's environment including others' behaviour

How does Brownlow study this "ability to control"?

1. What things (aspects of Cobbs Creek 'reality'/ situation) does he analyse?
2. Where is power **located**? Who holds it?
3. How does power **operate** upon people?

Get into groups

1. Study ways (practices and processes) in which power ***circulates*** among different social groups, resources, and spaces (Paulson et al., 2005)
2. *Where* is power **located**?
 - Outside of 'the subject'
3. How does power **operate**?
 - Power presses and shapes subject (community and park) **from the outside**

Block 2

DEEPER INTO STRUCTURALIST EXPLANATION OF POWER AND POLITICS

'Third World' within

- “Today, the Cobbs Creek “condition” is dominated by social indicators of inequality and neglect: ...male unemployment near 50%, ...” (p.231)
- Third World conditions/ spaces inside ‘First World’: Cobbs Creek is
 - A ‘First World’ periphery
 - The ‘Third World’ within
- First-Third World divide: result of a global process of uneven development
 - First World: benefits (e.g. from NR use) – Third World: costs & risks -> unequal distributions



WikiLeaks cables: Shell's grip on Nigerian state revealed

US embassy cables reveal top executive's claims that company 'knows everything' about key decisions in government ministries

David Smith in Lagos, Wednesday 8 December 2010



Despite billions of dollars in oil revenue, 70% of people in Nigeria live below the poverty line. Photograph: George Osodi/AP

Power in PE: a *social relation* built on **asymmetrical distributions** of resources and risks (Hornborg, 2001)

1. Resources & benefits: which?
2. Risks: what?
3. Asymmetrical distribution risks/ resources: who gets what?

The oil giant Shell claimed it had inserted staff into all the main ministries of the Nigerian government, giving it access to politicians' every move in the oil-rich Niger Delta, according to a leaked US diplomatic cable. The company's top executive in Nigeria told US diplomats that Shell had seconded employees to every relevant department and so knew "everything that was being done in those ministries"...Nigeria is Africa's leading oil producer and the eighth biggest exporter in the world, accounting for 8% of US oil imports. Although a recent UN report largely exonerated the company, critics accuse Shell, the biggest operator in the delta, and other companies, of causing widespread pollution and environmental damage in the region. Militant groups engaged in hostage-taking and sabotage have proliferated.

Structuralism: the 'backwaters'

- Shroeder et al. (2006)
 - “Drawing on structuralist arguments, sees the First World as part of a global process of capitalist uneven development
 - The same forces that produced the Third World as such are responsible for creating **peripheries, backwaters, wastelands, remote areas**, etc. within advanced capitalist nations as well”

Structuralism: binaries

- The First – Third World **binary**
 - **Structuralism:** to explain/ understand social reality, builds models based on binaries
 - Structuralism makes a distinction between **surface structure** (superstructure) and **deep structure** (infrastructure/base structure) (Glazer)
 - to understand the surface structure one has to understand the **deep structure**, and how it influences the surface structure
 - Assiter (1984): structures are the "**real things**" that **lie beneath the surface** (or the appearance of meaning)
- *Note: origins in Freud's psychoanalysis
- surface structure = conscious; deep structure = unconscious
 - E.g. anxiety (conscious-surface expression) in front of a wolf is result of unconscious (deep structure) 'trauma' in e.g. early childhood

Key approaches and binaries

- In political ecology, Marxism is probably the most influential structuralist approach
- Traditionally, a **key surface-base binary**:
 - Economics: deep structure (base)
 - Ideology, politics: surface structure (superstructure)

Key approaches and binaries: e.g.

- Society's relations of production = **economic base**
 - e.g. capitalist relations: means of production (non-human inputs, e.g. tools + infrastructure + natural K, e.g. land) are held privately
- Society's **superstructure** (e.g. legal system, ideology, etc.) merely expresses those social conditions (private ownership of MoP) and dominant class interests
 - E.g. upper and upper-middle class (bourgeois) dominate working class

Environmental change

- “I demonstrate how urban ecologies are politically inscribed and manipulated in a manner that reflects and reproduces social relations of power and inequality” (Brownlow, 2006, p.228)
 - **Binaries:** environmental change (ecologies of neglect and insecurity) reflect what happens in the base structure (economic and political system)
- Power = **coercion, domination** that is imposed
 - coercive practices (actions) of actors, e.g. Rizzo, gangs
 - coming/experienced **from the outside**, from those actions

Value of structuralism

- Refines approaches to study of domination: important
 - Domination brings inequality and environmental injustice = undesirable
 - Inequality and power differentials: deeper roots of environmental degradation (e.g. Latin America – Paulson, 2005)
- Logic of dominant (e.g. capitalist) investment-> adverse effects:
 - spatial patterns of environmental racism (e.g. landfills in African-American communities)
 - ‘First World’ peripheries (e.g. Cobbs Creek): spaces of domination

Classroom exercise 2

- Get back into your previous groups
- Can you now think of an example where the same thing (Cobbs Creek degradation) has happened?
 - Discuss
 - Decide on example
 - Present, describe example to rest of the class

Answers should include following key elements

- **Coercion** (domination) and links to environ degradation
- How power shapes **from the outside**
- Use/ build upon **binaries**
 - Base structure
 - Superstructure
 - Groups
- Analyse: **practices** and **processes**
 - Flesh out how these facilitate imposing one's "will even against.."
 - Identify power with specific groups who exercise it: who exercises power upon whom?
- Explain how degradation is result of a **system and its structure** that produces degradation